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**Being a Change Agent at the Middle School Level**

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In order to be a change agent at the middle school level, you need to see the need for change and then develop a plan to make it happen. Educators who are complacent and satisfied with the status quo will not be looking to change anything. Education is always changing, and as educators, we need to get on the bus. Schools are an ever-evolving entity and need leaders and teachers who can adapt to the change and be the face of the needed change. This article will look at six ways to be a change agent at the middle school level and give in-depth ways to make it happen. All you need is a willing spirit and a willingness to take the “change” journey. As you know, there are many roads to change. This article gives you the six items that I feel are most needed in middle schools across the country.

- **Shared Leadership**– “Shared Leadership is a model of governance where principals seek out others in their school to build partnerships, tap others’ strengths, and jointly move the vision forward” (Burgess & Bates, 2017). For years, schools have utilized a top-down style of leadership where the principal makes decisions, and the teachers follow them. We are moving into a new era of leadership in schools across the country, and schools are following the shared leadership model. The principal is still the main decision maker; however, there are times that the principal and the teachers make informed decisions together, and even times when teachers make decisions on their own. When a school has a shared vision and mission that is well understood by all stakeholders, this type of leadership model is possible. Using a shared leadership model, principals seek out teacher leaders and utilize their strengths to bring about change in the school. Teachers are allowed to give input on changes they would like to see made and are even allowed to develop plans on how to implement the change. This type of leadership is needed to help teachers reach their full potential and utilize all the gifts that they possess.
- **Assess the TWC (Teacher Working Conditions)**- If a school wants change, they must look at the available data to see exactly where they stand in relation to their district, their state, and their nation. The North Carolina TWC is a great place for NC leadership teams to begin to look to see what is working at their school and what needs to be improved. “The **North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions (NC TWC)** survey is an **anonymous** statewide survey of licensed school-based educators to assess teaching conditions at the school, district and state level” (ncteachingconditions.org). It is conducted biennially. The last TWC was conducted in March 2016.

The TWCS has nine areas that are assessed:

1. Use of Time
2. Facilities and Resources
3. Community Engagement and Support
4. Managing Student Conduct
5. Teacher Leadership
6. School Leadership
7. Professional Development
8. Instructional Practices and Support
9. New Teacher Support

If you want to see a change in your school, take a look at the most recent TWC and compare it to the one completed two years prior. This will give your team a great picture of areas that are improving and those that need change. Once you have made your list, continue to target areas where you have had the greatest impact. When you have targeted the areas of weakness, work as a team to develop ideas to improve in those areas. Through your shared leadership model, cultivate

teacher leaders in the areas of need. You may only wish to start with 3-5 changes at a time. More may overwhelm your staff. Pick the ones with the most impact to target first.

- **Have Critical Conversations**— In order for change to occur, there are times when critical conversations are needed. The principal/mentor/coach needs to be able to ask the “tough” questions. All decisions that are made at a school should be based on good data. When you have a teacher who is not making growth or using ineffective practices in the classroom, there must be a conversation about what is taking place in the classroom. These critical conversations give both parties (administrators/mentors/coaches, and teachers) a chance to make informed decisions about how to get the needed results. Data speaks for itself. However, test data is not our only source of reference. There needs to be observation data, walk through data, lesson planning data, along with test scores to see where the disconnect is occurring. Often times during critical conversations feelings can be hurt, and one party may become defensive. It is important to build rapport during critical conversations. Start the conversation with common goals in mind and be honest in your assessment of the situation. Listen twice as much as you talk. Really hear what the person has to say on the subject. Be confident of your position on the topic at hand but show respect. Make a plan and follow through with continual support. Make sure that the person knows that you want to see them succeed and will be their greatest cheerleader. Check in often and give the person great strategies to utilize. It is often helpful for teachers to observe great teaching to get a point of reference for what you want them to try. Also, offer to do model lessons or co-teaching with the teacher to add that extra needed support.
- **Triple Staff Appreciation Effort**—It is important for school staff to know they are appreciated. Their job is difficult, but oh, so rewarding. As an administrative team, it is important to triple your staff appreciation efforts in order to build morale and positively affect your school climate. Your efforts do not need to be costly. Small things like a monthly coffee bar, treats at holidays and at teacher appreciation days, as well as, offering to teach a class or grade a stack of papers would be greatly appreciated. Get your PTO (Parent-Teacher Organization) on board, and they can be a great help. They can provide payday breakfast each month to the staff or have fun things like a chocolate fountain at Valentines or a soup lunch during Super Bowl week. The ideas are endless, and teachers will appreciate any effort you make.
- **Build Teacher Leadership and Capacity**—“While research has shown that teachers are the most important factor in student achievement, *principals* are key to successful teacher practice (Childress, 2014, p.8). Principals use the teacher evaluation system to gather data on teaching practices in the classroom. Once the observations are complete, the principal needs to provide meaningful feedback, along with mentoring and coaching. During those post-conference conversations, principals need to remember that teachers have a gift and are sharing it daily with their students. Teachers need to be encouraged, affirmed, and celebrated as well as, coached and mentored to be the BEST that they can be. All decisions rest on the fact that our school will always do “what is best for our students.” They are our #1 priority. Schools should also use the data gathered from teacher evaluations and walk-throughs to develop their professional development plan. The offerings should be based on the needs extracted from the observation data and teacher input. Utilize the teacher leadership in your building when possible to lead professional development sessions. The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (1996) stated, “The one factor that can make the most difference in improving student achievement is a ‘knowledgeable, skillful teacher’ in front of the classroom.” It is up to principals, coaches, and mentors to build teacher leadership and capacity, so there is an effective teacher in each and every classroom in America.
- **Challenge the Status Quo by Assessing Accountability**— If we continue to do what we have always done, we will always get what we always gotten. Nothing will change. Just

because the curriculum is taught does not mean it is learned. There has to be accountability in the classroom. When teachers and staff have an aversion to change, nothing new can happen. Education is ever changing, and we need to be ready to change with it. Status quo is defined as the existing state of affairs. People satisfied with the status quo see no reason to change. Education has moved in the direction of collaboration. Teachers at all levels are mandated to collaborate with their peers through department meetings, grade level meetings, and Professional Learning Communities. In these meetings, data is shared, teaching strategies and best practices are shared, along with classroom management techniques. Once change is occurring in your building, there has to be a process for accountability. We all know that when test scores are released, they are released to parents and families, communities, and school stakeholders. When we evaluate the data and embrace change, we have to be sure that accountability is part of the equation. Observations, walk-throughs, collaborative meetings, peer observations, coaching, mentoring, and analysis of lesson and yearly plans become a part of the accountability piece. Administrative teams, coaches, and mentors need to be sure they are following up on action plans and strategic planning to make sure the changes are occurring in a timely manner.

We all need to be ready to embrace change. The six items discussed here can help schools across the country empower their staff through appreciation efforts and leadership opportunities. Shared leadership can provide teachers and staff with a voice to make decisions on the school level. Using data to make critical decisions is a must in this day and age of school accountability. There is also the need for critical conversations and accountability when change is needed. When we work together as a group of dedicated professionals, each and every school can provide an effective and engaging education for all students. Be the change that you want to see.

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